Olympian Raven Saunders Discloses Her Battle With Depression

Saunders, who placed fifth in the women's shot put at the 2016 Rio Olympics, shares her mental health journey in a recent documentary.

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In advance of the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, shot-putter Raven Saunders is speaking up about her own history of depression to raise awareness about the often-stigmatized disease. A Nike spokesperson, Saunders is the subject of a PBS mini-documentary tracing her progression from unusually strong kid to Olympic athlete. The film premiered earlier this month, according to NBC News.

In January 2020, Saunders read about the 2019 suicide of Bryce Gowdy, a homeless Black teenager who received a scholarship to play football for Georgia Tech. Reportedly, his family's precarious financial situation so worried him that he felt compelled to take his own life.

Gowdy's indisputably tragic story resonated with Saunders. As a child in Charleston, South Carolina, she witnessed the chaos and domestic abuse introduced into her mother's home by various stepparents with drug and alcohol issues.

Being tough "was a protective mechanism," she said, adding that she lived in constant fear of opening "up to the wrong person because they may try and use it against me later on."

Her dysfunctional home life drove Saunders to start weight lifting at her high school, where she rapidly distinguished herself as a force to be reckoned with, earning the nickname "Diesel" in her freshman year for her ability to bench-press 205 pounds. She proved herself more than worthy of the moniker time and time again, eventually winning state titles, setting collegiate records, making the 2016 U.S. Olympic team and placing fifth in the women's shot put at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

However, the training required to compete at that level took a toll on Saunders's mental health, as did her classes and finances. Once she returned from Brazil, she descended into despair.

"I had no type of mental break to de-stress… .As the weeks kept going, I was in a daze," she told NBC. "Everything else outside of training, I honestly just gave up on…It was kind of like a hopelessness."

While on her way to practice one day, Saunders considered driving her car—and herself—off a cliff. The passing thought was a wake-up call. Terrified of what she might do next, she texted an old therapist, according to The Post and Courier.

Soon after, the therapist responded, “Give me a minute to help you.”

Saunders spent most of the next two months in a mental health facility. She credits the care she received there with substantially improving her outlook on life. Therapy “helped so much in the form of self-discovery and really learning about me as a person outside of my sport,” Saunders told NBC. With the PBS film, she hopes to start a dialogue about mental health and care for professional athletes.

“I felt like by opening up and telling the world my story, another college athlete could possibly be like, ‘I would never have thought that somebody that has done what they’ve done could’ve been through the exact same thing that I have,’” Saunders said.

Black women are more likely to develop depression than their white counterparts, according to the Columbia University Department of Psychiatry. For more on this disparity, read “Amid COVID and Racial Unrest, Black Churches Put Faith in Mental Health Care” and “Suicide Attempts Are on the Rise Among Black Teens.”

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